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Theatre Critics' Reviews
1954

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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Fanny"

New York Post

November 5, 1954

By Richard Watts Jr.

The French Waterfront to Music

It is hardly surprising that "Fanny," which opened last night at the Majestic Theater, is inclined to be top-heavy. For the new musical play has a book that was fashioned by S. N. Behrman and Joshua Logan from a dramatic trilogy of the Marseilles waterfront by Marcel Pagnol, and to pack the material of three plays into one is in itself quite a task. When, in addition, there has to be found room for some twenty songs by Harold Rome and the customary ballet number, it was no doubt inevitable that "Fanny" should seem uncomfortably crowded.

This is not meant to deny that the new show has its share of notable merits. In fact, a list of them is bound to be impressive. There are such brilliant performers as Ezio Pinza, Walter Slezak and William Tabbert to head its cast; Jo Mielziner has designed a series of colorful and atmospheric settings and Alvin Colt has provided picturesque costumes; Mr. Rome has composed an interesting if not altogether exhilarating score, and Helen Tamaris has staged some lively dances, including a handsome circus ballet. "Fanny" is not short of talent.

The Authors

High among those talents, of course, are those of Mr. Behrman, who is a master of graceful comedy writing, and Mr. Logan, who is an expert in all the arts of the popular theater. The narrative, which they have compiled and compressed from M. Pagnol's French text, offers a serious and sympathetic account of the call of the sea versus the call of love among the racy denizens of Marseilles' teeming port. It has its touching moments, and it has the virtue of dealing with believable human beings, but it also has a way of seeming ponderous and undramatic.

The resulting trouble is that "Fanny" is so frequently bogged down in its story that it rarely moves along with the proper emotional or musical effectiveness. Book and score, instead of being mutually helpful, appear to get in each other's way. There are attractive songs, which are always admirably sung, and the performances never fail to be striking and alive, but an air of heavy-handedness settles down over the proceedings, and I had the unhappy feeling that, for all its incidental blessings, the evening never quite got started.

The Players

These blessings, however, shouldn't be overlooked. The colorfulness of the background is always tastefully handled. The moments of authentic emotional appeal are decidedly helped by the playing of Mr. Pinza as the father of the boy who deserts his sweetheart to take to the sea, by Mr. Slezak as the good-hearted fellow who knows that his bride is having a child by the fugitive lover, by Mr. Tabbert as the errant young man, and by Florence Henderson as the unhappy girl. And there are three or four songs that are warmly appealing.

It may be said of "Fanny," then, that it is colorful, human, tuneful and both richly and handsomely decked out. Its players have the advantage of being not only able to act their roles vividly and with emotional honesty but to sing with a skill that is not often to be found in popular musical plays. The Messrs. Pinza and Tabbert have certainly lost none of the famous excellence that contributed so much to the success of the unforgettable "South Pacific," and Mr. Slezak and Miss Henderson enact their emotional scenes touchingly. But "Fanny" substitutes color and size for inspiration.

"FANNY"

Musical play by S. N. Behrman and Joshua Logan, based on the trilogy "Marius", "Fanny" and "Cesar" by Marcel Pagnol; staged by Mr. Logan; music and lyrics by Harold Rome; settings by Jo Mielziner; costumes by Alvin Colt; dances by Helen Tamiris; musical direction by Lehman Engel; presented by David Merrick and Mr. Logan at the Majestic Theatre, November 4, 1954. The cast:

Arab Rug Seller.....Mohammed el Bakkar
Marius.....William Tabbert
Fanny.....Florence Henderson
Maori Vendor..Katherine Graves
Lace Vendor.....Betty Carr
Claudine.....Tani Seitz
Claudette.....Dran Seitz
Charles.....Wally Strauss
Nanette.....Norma Doggett
Mimi.....Carolyn Maye
Marie.....Ellen Matthews
Michellette.....Jane House
Panisse.....Walter Slezak
Sailor.....Herb Banke
The Admiral.....Gerald Price
Moroccan Drummer.....Charles Blackwell
Second Mate.....Henry Michel
Fisherman.....Steve Wiland
Sailmaker.....Jack Washburn
Fish-Stall Woman.....Florence Dunlap
An Arab.....Michael Scrittorale
Cesar.....Ezio Pinza
Honorine.....Edna Preston
Escartifique.....Alan Carney
M. Brun.....Don McHenry
Arab Dancing Girl...Nejla Ates
Cesario.....Lloyd Reese
Butler.....Mike Mason
Maid.....Pat Finch
Garage Owner.....Tom Gleason
Nun.....Ruth Schumacher
Priest.....Ray Dorian

DAILY NEWS

November 5, 1954

'Fanny' a Warm and Captivating Musical With a Grand Big Cast

By JOHN CHAPMAN

There is enough of everything in "Fanny" to make two or three full-scale musicals, but I'm glad that producers David Merrick and Joshua Logan have kept it all together in one grand big romance. It opened last evening at the Majestic Theatre, and it is filled with warmth and delight.

It is filled with story, too, perilously close to overflowing as it tells of a girl in Marseilles who loves one man and weds another. It is a sentimental tale, fashioned by S. N. Behrman and Mr. Logan from three stories by Marcel Pagnol, and it ends—quite curiously for a Broadway musical — on a note of heartbreak. This is to its advantage, for it gives the whole long story character and validity.

Memorable Cast

The cast is something to remember, with Ezio Pinza, Walter Slezak, Florence Henderson and William Tabbert carrying the pleasant burden of song and story and revealing themselves as actors as well as singers. Pinza, who was an artist long before he ever heard of Broadway, is magnificent in the role of a waterfront tavern keeper. Slezak is utterly disarming as a wealthy sailmaker. Miss Henderson is a sweet dream as a girl who marries a man she does not love in order to give her unborn child a name. And William Tabbert, who had such a touching romance with the island girl in "South Pacific," has another rueful role as the young man who runs away to sea from the girl whose child is his. Pinza is particularly admirable—an actor of great skill, as anybody knows who saw him in his great days at the Met, and still a fine singer.

The score of "Fanny" is the best work Harold Rome has done yet. His music and lyrics have a wide range of style and content, starting right off with Slezak's captivating number, "Never too Late for Love," continuing with Tabbert's "Restless Heart" and going from there to Pinza's suavely jolly "Why Be Afraid to Dance?" And these are only the first three important numbers in the show. There are many more, including a charmingly staged chorus number, "Birthday Song," and another knockout by Pinza, "Love Is a Very Light Thing." Miss Henderson, who has to be sweetly romantic most of the time, finds an excellent change of pace in a lightly amusing ditty, "Be Kind to Your Parents."

Rome's score is smartly embellished by orchestrations by Philip J. Lang — Lang's treatment of "Restless Heart" is notably original —and it is played by a very good orchestra under the direction of Lehman Engel.

The settings — various interiors and exteriors in Marseilles—are by Jo Mielziner, and they are splendid. So, too, are Alvin Colt's costumes and the dance arrangements by Helen Tamiris. Logan has directed "Fanny" brilliantly, guiding an enormous show with a firm and knowing hand. It is something everybody can be proud of — and something everybody on this side of the footlights can rejoice in.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

November 5, 1954

'Fanny' Charms All the Way

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

One of the nicest things about "Fanny" is the way it proves that two great performers can make a great team. Ezio Pinza and Walter Slezak as two lifelong friends who go through a tremendous drama in their middle age corner the market in charm in the Majestic Theater production.

Mr. Pinza surprises enormously here with the bright way he handles comedy. That he has a beautiful voice and loads of magnetism, one now takes for granted. Here he is as sly and gay as a Chevalier as well.

Mr. Slezak, grown tremendous, resembles a jaunty and lovable walrus. He plays with such tender sincerity that he is able to sing one song and play a scene which could be quite shocking done by anyone else.

He is a well-to-do storekeeper in Marseilles who loves young Fanny. And when he finds that she is to have a child by Mr. Pinza's son, who has gone to sea, he wants to marry her more than ever.

Home Is the Sailor.

In time the boy comes home. The young lovers see that their choice has been made. But in the end, Mr. Slezak on his deathbed is leaving them a legacy of happiness, to be passed on to Mr. Pinza.

In the title role, Florence Henderson makes a very auspicious appearance for her Broadway premiere. She has one of the loveliest voices in the theater, heard all too seldom here, though notably in "I Have to Tell You." But more exciting, she plays a long and arduous dramatic role without a quaver or a false glance.

William Tabbert is the seagoing lover, torn between exotic lands and the girl he grew up with. He sings robustly the title song, and the oddly driving chant "Restless Heart." Mr. Tabbert achieves all the remote distractedness the role needs.

"Fanny" is an unusual show in a number of ways.

Emotional Peaks.

The songs are often so fleet you barely get used to them before they are over. They serve as real emotional peaks in the dialog. Often, too, the orchestra underlines the talk with brief random passages.

In general "Fanny" is more the "play with music" so often talked about than an outright "musical." It is at its best then, too, for the story is so touching, so real and haunting, that you may be disturbed by the big outbursts of musical production, splendid as they are to see.

It is the songs of real communication which make the deepest impressions. "I Like You" is just the sudden outburst of a son to his father, and "Welcome Home" is the most direct, simple emotion.

The Mielziner production outdoes anything that even he has conceived before. The transitions are like mirages, so subtly and quickly do they occur, as curtains and lights appear and disappear by magic.

The Colt costumes burst with color, and the dances Tamiris has designed effervesce happily over the action. There are several jingly tunes you'll be dancing to, and Harold Rome's title song will challenge every romantic singer alive, pro or amateur.

The New York Times

November 5, 1954

The Theatre: 'Fanny' Has Debut at Majestic

Pagnol Trilogy Bows as Musical Play

By BROOKS ATKINSON

EVERYTHING has turned out fine in "Fanny," which opened at the Majestic last evening. No believer in false economy, Joshua Logan has heaped all the splendors of a huge show on top of it.

But at the core remains a bitter-sweet story that is human, comic and moving, and that accounts for the grave pleasures of the evening. The story comes originally from Marcel Pagnol, the humorous tale-bearer of Marseilles, but S. N. Behrman and Mr. Logan have worked it into the form of music drama. It has to do with Marius, a wayward lad of the waterfront, who goes to sea instead of marrying the girl he loves. She marries a rich merchant who becomes the recognized father of Marius' child.

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That's all that really matters in "Fanny." But the story is so genuine and rueful, the writing is so tender, the music is so melodic and the casting is so engaging that it results in a thoroughly absorbing theatre experience. As the temperamental and braggart father of Marius: Ezio Pinza; as the rich merchant: Walter Slezak; as the waterfront vagabond: William Tabbert; as Fanny: Florence Henderson. They are all wonderful. Apart from their singing, they play with taste and sincerity. What becomes of Marius' son is a matter of concern and consequence.

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All the bounty of showmanship that Mr. Logan has brought to it is of first rank. Jo Mielziner has managed to cover the waterfront artistically, tossing in a full-rigged ship as an extra dividend. Alvin Colt's bizarre costumes are spectacular. Helen Tamiris has invented a number of ballets—some joyous, some symbolic and precocious. Nejla Ates wriggles through the hottest belly-dance New York has seen since the Little Flower blew a police whistle on the burlesque theatres.

But for once this theatregoer finds himself impatient with Mr. Logan's passion for the supercolossal. For the dramatic content of "Fanny" is fine enough to stand on its own feet. The story is a simple one that involves appealing characters and the style is sentimental with a tart, worldly flavor.

And Harold Rome has written an idiomatic score that conveys the simple emotions of the story. There is nothing in the showmanship half so affecting as Mr. Pinza's artless singing of an idyll called "Love Is a Very Light Thing," or his exultant "Why Be Afraid to Dance?" or his domestic rhapsody called "Welcome Home."

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Mr. Slezak's comic unction in the part of the merchant, has never been so charming. Nor has he ever sung a love song more ingratiating than "To My Wife." He is also excellent in a wistful number entitled "Panisse and Son." Mr. Tabbert pours his familiar vitality into a sort of sea spiritual called "Restless Heart" and a song of despair entitled "Fanny." Miss Henderson, an attractive young lady with big eyes, sings "Have to Tell You" with considerable rapture. In the last act she and Mr. Tabbert make something dramatic out of "The Thought of You."

Slezak and Pinza Are Seen in Star Roles

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Those are the things that are worthwhile in "Fanny." Luxurious and imposing as the salesmanship may be, it cheapens the theme, as though Mr. Logan had been frightened by "Kismet." As the writers of a raffish and romantic story, Mr. Behrman and Mr. Logan need nothing but a composer and some actors. The composer has caught the mood beautifully. The actors have a bold style, a sense of humor and a lot of color. "Fanny," is a fine folk tale because the writers and actors are sound.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
November 5, 1954

THEATER

'Fanny'

By WALTER F. KERR

Waterfront Cavalcade

EARLY in "Fanny," the new musical at the Majestic, rotund Walter Slezak lifts an admonishing finger, wrinkles an eyebrow, and, with a benign little smirk, remarks that "Love isn't a matter of age—it's a matter of aptitude."

That turns out to be true of the theater, too. The bright particular stars of "Fanny" are Mr. Slezak himself and one Ezio Pinza. Both are gentlemen of, shall we say, the middle years. And both are all but bursting with aptitude.

• • •

Quality is its own herald. When Mr. Pinza, wrapped in a bartender's apron, a corduroy jacket and a raffish cap, turns easily toward the footlights and lets a first light-hearted fragment of song drift toward the rear of the balcony, there is no need for lavish orchestration, for bustling support in the background, for the color which Jo Mielziner has lavished on his Marseilles - waterfront settings. The color, the warmth, the command all come from this mature, and magnificent personality.

It comes without effort. Midway in the first act, Mr. Pinza rolls home from a day on the town, drops with a sigh into a spindle-backed chair, stretches his legs, and sings a little hymn of praise to the familiar furniture. The Harold Rome song is called "Welcome Home." With Mr. Pinza chanting it, it is charming.

• • •

Walter Slezak is the other highly unorthodox star of the community's latest song-and-dance extravaganza. He is, as everyone knows, spherical in dimension but jubilantly light of foot. Light of heart, too. As he waves his bulk at the pretty young girls, thumps to the stage floor in a bobbling proposal of marriage, or tilts his hat and glides happily about in the expectation that he will henceforth be known as an irresistible rakehell, he is the spirit of impish comedy, an overweight Puck. And he tosses off a couple of listenable jingles—"It's Never Too Late for Love" among them—as well as a tender little salute called "To My Wife" with polished, graceful despatch.

• • •

Between them, the Messrs. Pinza and Slezak give "Fanny" its funniest moments and its most moving moments. They also give it what virtually no one else in the company can force out—flavor. "Fanny" is adapted from Marcel Pagnol's now-famous trilogy of screenplays detailing the mismatched loves of a couple of port-town families. In co-producing, co-authoring, and directing the musical amalgam, Joshua Logan has done everything within reason to preserve the earthy tartness, the shrewd realism, the robust honesty of the original. He has invited S. N. Behrman to help him fashion a literate book, with a fair number of the original lines left in. ("A girl doesn't have to be pregnant to get married, you know.") He has commissioned Jo Mielziner to do some handsome water-color backgrounds, Helen Tamiris to enliven the pageant with snatches of dance, Harold Rome to compose sometimes skipping, sometimes serious, tunes.

• • •

But the racy, pungent, cantankerous accent of the original is subdued and attenuated. In part this is due to the simple fact of its musicalization for Broadway: spread a simply, fairly folksy comedy out to the dimensions of a vast and glittering proscenium and something of its simplicity is bound to vanish. A batch of chorus boys and chorus girls offering gifts to a baby on its first birthday is more a curious than an affecting picture. Nor do the young lovers of the piece, pleasantly played and sung by William Tabbert and Florence Henderson, seem to be in Marseilles; they seem to be downstage. The parts are juvenile and ingenue, in penny-plain English.

• • •

Then there is a tendency to use the orchestra in fairly portentous fashion. This is, of course, a musical "play" and perhaps worthy of a little ambitious sobriety. But there are few dialogue passages which are not underscored or interrupted with mighty mood music, lending an ominous weight that the narrative is not prepared to support. This streak of the "grand manner" further shows up in the pantomime montages and stretches of dance. It is sometimes effective: when Fanny, in the act of marrying an older man, reels dizzily off into a nightmare that brings her young lover back to her, the point of the scene is strikingly made. At other times, particularly in an undersea ballet that separates the youngsters, "Fanny" spills over into unsuitably pretentious spectacle.

Ezio Pinza has an appealing episode during which he tries to teach his errant son how to make vermouth cassis without too much seltzer. "Fanny," I think, has too much seltzer. It is often difficult to taste the wine

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Journal-American
November 5, 1954

Play Proves Disappointing

Many Great Talents Fail To Make Plot Believable

By JOHN McCLAIN

SAD to report, "Fanny" is a serious disappointment. Perhaps we all expected too much from Joshua Logan, S. N. Behrman and Harold Rome, but the fact remains that the musical which opened at the Majestic last night lacks anything very distinguished in the way of pace, humor, music or excitement. Sure, it is big and beautiful, but it is also hollow.

This is all the more regrettable, since it has the services of Ezio Pinza, a great singer and an extremely capable actor; Walter Slezak, a competent singer and a fine actor, William Tabbert, Florence Henderson and such other established artisans as Jo Mielziner and Helen Tamaris. It is difficult to understand how so much talent could go so far afield.

Perhaps the difficulty can be traced to the original introduction of the characters, and the fact that we are plunged into the plot before we have any rooting interest in any of them.

Love Story

Within a matter of minutes we are led to believe that the poor daughter of a fish peddler is in love with the poor son of a cafe proprietor on the Marseilles waterfront "not so long ago." It is then borne home that the lad has a hankering to go to sea, but before departing he takes time out to spend an evening with his girl friend.

Somehow I never was made to feel the depth of the love story, nor any valid sympathy for the young man's insatiable yearning to ship out. I found myself equally unwilling to accept the girl's decision to marry a wealthy sailmaker who is happy to have her, even though he knows she is about to become the mother of the departed sailor's child.

This is a situation which could be made entirely plausible (and was) in a novel, but falls short of fulfillment in the shallow delineation presented last night.

Thus, having no deep emotional involvement, it became a matter of slight importance to me that the stand-in father had a weak heart and was therefore destined to die in time for the father and mother to be reunited with their son.

Forgetting the story, there seemed also to be a notable lack of first class musical and production numbers. Bill Tabbert, who plays the sailor, comes closest with two offerings in the first act, "Restless Heart" and "Fanny," and joins Ezio Pinza in another agreeable ballad called "I Like You."

Efforts Limited

Miss Henderson, as the girl, is a decorative and engaging

performer, but her efforts are limited to very little dialogue and one solo number.

Although he engages in various musical bits with a variety of players, Mr. Pinza has only a couple of opportunities to uncork his great voice, and Mr. Slezak, toiling relentlessly throughout, has to wait for the second act to score with "To My Wife."

The big first act production number features the undraped contortions of Najla Ates, who has been doing the same grind in various saloons around town, and in the second act there is a children's circus party, French style. After this there is a long and languid period during which Mr. Pinza sits on Mr. Slezak's bed and waits for him to die.

I haven't the slightest doubt that Josh Logan will somehow pull all this together and make it into a hit. But I'm afraid he'll have to start at the beginning.

Daily Mirror

November 5, 1954

'Fanny' Makes Bow Here At the Majestic

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Several of the theatre's ablest craftsmen fashioned "Fanny" from a trilogy by Marcel Pagnol about the picturesque Marseilles waterfront. S. N. Behrman and Joshua Logan collaborated on the book while Harold Rome composed the score. Such a lineup should spell success in capital letters. But it doesn't, somehow.

The libretto is labored and often tasteless. It has to do with the son of a cafe owner who has no knack for his father's business. Rather is he fascinated by sailors' stories of the seven seas, of the Orient, where trees smell of camphor and pepper. He has an affair with the daughter of a fish stall keeper, and then runs away to sea.

THE GIRL, FINDING she is to have a child, marries an elderly and wealthy sail-maker. He is overjoyed when she gives birth to a boy. He bestows on the youngster an affection such as his real father could not, and he does everything in his power to keep the lad away from the docks and seamen's tall tales of adventure and far places. But we came away with the impression that the boy was destined to follow in his father's footsteps.

Such a saga should be moving and amusing, indeed, but it seldom is either. Emotion seems to have eluded the authors for much of the time, while the comedy is pedestrian. It is difficult to believe that such gifted and skillful dramatists as Behrman and Logan could not have gotten more genuine theatrical impact from such promising material.

The score by Harold Rome is a lengthy one, pleasant if less than distinguished. He is fortunate in having Ezio Pinza, Walter Slezak, Florence Henderson and William Tabbert to sing it. This they do so persuasively as to give the impression that the music is first-rate.

• • •

ONE OF THE more hummable melodies comes late in the evening: "Be Kind to Your Parents," done with charm by Miss Henderson and Master Lloyd Reese. For those with an inclination toward something less filial, there is sensational hip-tossing by Nejla Ates, who, according to the program, learned her art in Istanbul.

Producers David Merrick and Logan must have spent a sizable fortune on "Fanny." Jo Mielziner, a wizard among designers, has devised stagefuls of atmospheric settings, while Alvin Colt has contributed scads of colorful costumes. Helen Tamiris' choreography lacks originality, and, for us, proved a disappointment.

The first-nighters rocked the Majestic Theatre's sturdy rafters with their applause Thursday evening, and there were notably robust ovations for Pinza and Slezak. We regret that we could share their enthusiasm but intermittently. There was much to like about the new arrival, but not quite enough.

"Quadrille"

NEW YORK **Herald Tribune**

November 4, 1954

THEATER

'Quadrille'

By WALTER F. KERR

Gilt Frame

IN THE life of every great performer there comes a time when he feels the need to sit for his portrait. That, I think, is what the Lunts are doing in "Quadrille."

Alfred Lunt enters the chartreuse drawing-room that Cecil Beaton has etched for the occasion with his head held high. On it there is a rising mane of impressive proportions and a beard that would do credit to Jove, or even to a candidate for the Nobel Prize.

Mr. Lunt glances from the mountaintops at a still breath-taking Lynn Fontanne, gently rubs his palms together, and offers a few lightly observant remarks in a quiet, bemused, and insinuating tone. His poise is unshatterable, his soft nasal tones in genteel good form.

• • •

From time to time a shiver of animation makes the picture move. The actor shudders whatever humorous jowls may lurk behind that beard as he thinks of his Boston-bred wife. He circles the room in lithe impatience as he tries to persuade Miss Fontanne to join him in a romantic chase. He pulls at his lower lip as he stares transfixed in admiration at the same Miss Fontanne. Once, he reads a deliciously insulting line as though he were blowing it through his nose like cigarette smoke.

Still or in motion, Mr. Lunt is magnificent. In "Quadrille," however, he is mostly still.

Miss Fontanne, too, has assumed the infinite repose of a china doll. Cecil Beaton has given her some enchanting costumes to drape about her feet, and as she leans slightly forchair, articulating perfectly through a piece of buttered toast, or directs her antenna-like eyelashes in a beam across the room, she is the very model of mocking elegance.

A silken sarcasm wafts from her lips, with just the suggestion of a barb in each mellifluous phrase. The pointing is so perfect that a resounding laugh follows the casual dismissal of a line like "In America, to come from Boston is essential." Cues are picked up before they know what has hit them, glances stab across the stage with the impact of an arrow. There is infinite vitality behind the reserved fa-

"QUADRILLE"

Comedy by Noel Coward; staged by Alfred Lunt; settings and costumes by Cecil Beaton; presented by John C. Wilson and H. M. Tennent, Ltd., at the Coronet Theatre, November 3, 1954. The cast:

First French Woman.....Madeleine Clive
First French Man.....Byron Mitchell
Buffet Manageress.....Patricia Quinn O'Hara
Rev. Edgar Spevin..Jerome Kilty
Sarah.....Phyllis Connard
Gwendolyn.....Nina Reader
Waiter.....Bruce Webster
Courier.....Richard Longman
Marquis of Heronden (Hubert)...Brian Aherne
Mrs. Axel Diensen (Charlotte)...Edna Best
Catchpole.....Harold Crane
Marchioness of Heronden (Serena)..Lynn Fontanne
Lady Harriet Ripley.....Brenda Forbes
Foster.....Mildred Clinton
Footman.....Rhoderick Walker
Axel Diensen.....Alfred Lunt
Octavia, Countess of Bonnington...Dorothy Sands
Second French Woman.....Mildred Clinton
Second French Man.....Michael Lewis

cade. But reserve once again, is the keynote to "Quadrille."

• • •

It isn't that the Lunts are deliberately turning Noel Coward's latest play into a hushed and fastidious portrait gallery. There just doesn't seem to be anything else to do with "Quadrille." Mr. Coward has painstakingly pieced together a mild-mannered fable about an errant couple (Edna Best and Brian Aherne) who have run off from their respective spouses, who are tracked down by the aforesaid spouses in a villa in France, who are escorted back to their proper households, and who are then ditched in turn by the pair who have found them.

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The author has not bestirred himself. He doesn't try for much in the way of wit beyond answering "Excuse me" with "Why, what have you done?" or beyond following "Vulgarity be damned" with "It usually is." There is an attractive little sally about a cousin once removed who was almost entirely removed when a horse fell on her—but that's about it. And since the charade has virtually nothing to offer in the way of substance, its opportunities for both merriment and emotion are limited.

Mr. Coward has further amplified his anecdote by employing some nineteen characters, two of which—the runaway husband and wife—are on stage, and very much in the way, most of the time. Edna Best does all she can to make a pouting bore tolerable, but, beyond looking fetching in a billowing outfit borrowed from Bo-Peep, she is stymied. Brian Aherne rattles off a good many longish sentences, for which the other actors apologize, and huffs and puffs with a perfectly credible pomposity; but there is no real fun in this part, either.

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This leaves first one Lunt, then another, standing on the sidelines for unhappily extended periods. When they do come together, the familiar sparkle, and the familiar rueful affection, rise to the surface readily. And these fragments may be enough to satisfy the myriads of honest souls who have sorely missed the stars for four long years. Like those mountains that must be climbed, the Lunts must be seen simply because they are there.

But they are there in a frieze. "Quadrille" pins them to Cecil Beaton's drawing board, where they stand in handsome, arresting immobility.

New York Post

November 4, 1954

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Lunts in a Noel Coward Play

It is an ancient statement about Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne that they would be delightful to watch if they were reading the telephone directory, and there have been cases when I have suspected that they and their audiences would have been better off if that had been what they were doing. Let it be said of their latest vehicle, Noel Coward's "Quadrille," which opened last night at the Coronet Theater, that, despite its frailties, it is open to no such attack. It supplies its stars with good roles which they play to perfection.

There are, in fact, several other things that may be said on behalf of "Quadrille." If it by no means reveals Mr. Coward in one of his wittiest or most urbane moods, it does show him writing what he correctly calls a "romantic comedy" with considerable grace and style. Then, too, he has set down a couple of scenes in which Mr. Lunt, playing an American railroad pioneer of the seventies, talks about the glory and excitement of railroading in opening up the vast western expanses of a new land, and they are speeches of beauty and eloquence.

The Lovers

Unfortunately, all of "Quadrille" is not nearly that good. Its story of the railroad man and a titled English lady, who fall in love while pursuing their runaway spouses to the south of France, has a pleasant quality and a period charm, but it is oddly lacking in vitality and humor. It has long arid stretches uncharacteristic of Mr. Coward, and the scenes in which Mr. Lunt and Miss Fontanne do not appear seem so savorless that one is almost driven to the belief they were written barrenly on purpose so that the stars would be missed.

Nothing could be more obvious, of course, than that no such strenuous measures were needed to make us appreciate the Lunts. They are, to put it briefly and not exactly with originality, superb. Just to watch Mr. Lunt, while he stands silently watching Miss Fontanne with growing appreciation as she puts the fugitive lovers in their place, is to see subtle and imaginative acting at its best. It is always a joy to observe them in action, not only because they are masterly performers, but also because they bring such style and relish to everything they do.

The Stars

It may not come under the head of higher criticism, but it is likewise worth noting that they are looking particularly well these days. Miss Fontanne is stunning and incredibly youthful in appearance, and Mr. Lunt is present in bearded splendor, and, when they really go into action, the theater seems itself again. Nor is it a mere demonstration of brilliant stage personality that they offer, although that certainly is not missing. This is light, deft acting at its peak, even if the play is far from completely worthy of such artful playing.

There are, by the way, other people in the cast, and they, too, are excellent. Edna Best is admirable as the weeping wife of the railroad man, and Brian Aherne plays the fatuous runaway husband in his ablest manner. In smaller roles, Jerome Kilty as a gushing clergyman and Dorothy Sands as a garrulous authoress offer talented and amusing portrayals. And Cecil Beaton has designed period sets and costumes that are colorful and charming. It does seem a shame that the play isn't richer in humorous inventiveness. But if "Quadrille" is second-rate Noel Coward, it offers first-rate Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne.

DAILY NEWS

November 4, 1954

The Lunts, Slick as Ever, Return In Coward's Romance, 'Quadrille'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Once again Noel Coward takes his lovers to the Riviera, which is an overseas outpost of the happy land which Ring Lardner called Out of Wedlock. It is lucky for Mr. Coward, not to mention us playgoers, that his lovers are Lynn Fontanne, Alfred Lunt, Edna Best and Brian Aherne, and that the Riviera and the costumes have been designed by Cecil Beaton. Indeed, the least stylish item of "Quadrille," which opened last evening at the Coronet Theatre, is the comedy itself.

This is not a snappish Coward play like "Private Lives," but rather an elderly one, being based on the premise that the Golden Coast is not exclusively the playground of the young. His mixed quartet, or quadrille, consists of people of middle age whose passions are more tempered than tempestuous. Tempered, too, are Coward's passions; he has lost his relish for the barb, the riposte and the civilized leer and is content with a large amount of fairly ordinary talk.

Gifted As Ever

But any play, even "Grandma's Diary," would be welcome here if it had the Lunts in it—and the Lunts are back again, as handsome and slick and gifted as ever. It is an infinite pleasure just to watch Miss Fontanne pour tea, which she does twice, and to see Mr. Lunt knuckle his brow and pop his eyes, which he does several times. Moreover, Best and Aherne are an excellent second team.

Coward has chosen the year 1873 for his double-barreled romance, and this period gives designer Beaton a chance to spread himself and the ladies, too. Sets, costumes, colors, bric-a-brac and makeups all have a wonderful air of quaint elegance.

Inter-Hemisphere Touch

The comedy, too, is quaintly elegant. One husband and one wife, not wed to each other, take off from fashionable Belgrave Square in London and hie to the Riviera. Almost immediately, the wife of the husband and the husband of the wife hie off in pursuit. If you know your Noel Coward, it isn't going to surprise you when the pair who are pursuing the lovers fall in love themselves, in a polite way. Coward also has added an inter-hemisphere touch to his customary continental comedy. Whereas Aherne and Miss Fontanne are titled subjects of Queen Victoria, Lunt and Miss Best are Americans.

There is a sizable supporting cast, and two other amusing performances are given by Jerome Kilty as a pestiferous churchman and Dorothy Sands as an old nut who writes sex novels under an assumed name. Lunt has directed "Quadrille" in the style to which it is accustomed.

Daily Mirror

November 4, 1954

Lunt & Fontanne Superb As 'Quadrille' Opens

By ROBERT COLEMAN

After a triumphant run of two years in London, Noel Coward's "Quadrille" finally reached Broadway Wednesday evening. Over here it should appeal to the smart set as a play, and to the many as a vehicle for the one and only Lunts. The Lunts, be it reported, are as brilliant as ever, and Miss Fontanne looks as lovely and youthful as an ingenue.

Coward wrote this romantic comedy to display the virtuosity of his friends and partners. It is a disarming work—not robustly amusing, never very moving, but freighted with some of the master's more incisive and urbane lines. There is little plot and not too much action, but the characters are quite wonderful.

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"QUADRILLE" has to do with Victorian England. A Marquis flees to the south of France with the wife of an American railroad magnate. His clever Marchioness and the transportation baron catch up with them, and succeed in making the affair look rather foolish. So the participants in Coward's dance return to their original partners. Temporarily.

Now you know as well as we do that when Lynn Fontanne and Alfred Lunt are in a play, they've got to get each other in the end. And so they do. The obtuse Marquis is again taken in—this time by a flighty and larcenous beauty—permitting his wife to discover just how sensible and likable the American diamond-in-the-rough really is.

"Quadrille" simply hasn't the consistent, bubbly sparkle of "Private Lives." Nor the sure-fire humor of "Blithe Spirit." Futhermore, it is full of topical allusions foreign to American playgoers. But, at its best, it contains some of Coward's deepest and most charming dialogue.

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MISS FONTANNE is quite gorgeous and irresistible as the shrewd, mannered Marchioness. A lady to her fingertips, an innate snob, she knows how to unbend gracefully when confronted by a man of moment and genuine merit. It is a joy, indeed, to study her changes of mood and heart.

Lunt is superb, too, as the bluff, uncouth, well-meaning American empire builder. He has a magnificent episode in which he describes his boyhood, his dreams and their realization. In the theatre we have encountered nothing more touching since that memorable scene in Zoe Akins' "Declasse," where Claude King, another fine actor, recounted his rise from newsboy to Wall Street tycoon.

Brian Aherne is immensely diverting as the errant Marquis, while Edna Best, a superior actress, works wonders with the part of a giddy Back Bay matron. Salutes are also due Dorothy Sands, Brenda Forbes and Jerome Kilty for other excellent characterizations.

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THE SETTINGS and costumes by Cecil Beaton are captivatingly rococo. Give us a period piece, and Beaton would be our man to set it off to a Queen's taste. And for the impeccable direction, credit the versatile Lunt.

If we were asked to describe the theatre in two words, we would say "the Lunts," of course. For no players of our time have represented theatre so significantly and electrifyingly as have they. As for "Quadrille," it gives them scope for their incomparable artistry. And it is Coward's nearest approach to the spirit and quality of Restoration comedy. In its quiet way, we suspect the Coronet's new tenant might be a modern masterpiece.

Journal American

November 4, 1954

Lunts Spark Coward Comedy

By JOHN McCLAIN

Warm Acting Animates Play

AFTER an absence of five years Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne have returned to New York, and the Coronet Theatre, this time dishing up their ineffable charm in some Victorian nonsense by Noel Coward entitled "Quadrille." Once again we are reminded that these two are institutions, permanent and apparently indestructible, and it matters little what property they choose to dignify at the moment.

Even in the short time they've been away we seem to forget their sorcery; their uncanny ability to bring charm and brilliance to conventional roles, to transform a conversation piece into a heartwarming and emotional experience. For it is no serious derogation of Mr. Coward's talents to say that without their services his little bijou would be pretty thin stuff indeed.

The sign on the marquee says "Alfred Lunt, Lynn Fontanne, Brian Aherne and Edna Best in 'Quadrille,'" and nobody from that moment onward needs a tea leaf to project the plot.

It becomes only a matter of so many bright words and a certain ingenuity to separate Miss Fontanne from Mr. Aherne, and Miss Best from Mr. Lunt, so that Alfred and Lynn can be united at the final curtain. In the present instance there is a brief and not unrewarding interval in which Mr. Aherne and Miss Best get together, but this fools nobody—the pattern remains intact.

Sheer Delight

In the process Miss Fontanne has a delicious time flouncing about her Belgravia drawing room and acidly denouncing her husband and his mistress in their Riviera hideaway.

She is also given several moments of sheer delight, tripping to the tune of an organ grinder on the bright afternoon when she has made up her mind to have her own inning in the sun. And all the while dressed to the teeth in Cecil Beaton's most ravishing creations and looking, so help me, infinitely younger than the day I first saw her 20 years ago.

Mr. Lunt, sporting a full beard and appearing equally callow, has the pleasure of getting off in a thoroughly down-to-earth American role. He is a railroad man, the son of an engineer, and the single speech in which he sets forth his pride in his country and his trade are enough to melt the frozen inhibitions of a British Marchioness—which in fact it does.

Of no less importance to the proceedings are the excellent contributions of Mr. Aherne and Miss Best. Theirs is a somewhat thankless task—he the stuffy peer, she the bumptious Bostonian — but they manage to bring some semblance of sympathy to their roles and keep the ball amusingly in the air while the Lunts are dancing in and out of each other's arms.

Able assists should also be credited to Jerome Kilty, Brenda Forbes and Dorothy Sands.

Great Production

The production supplied by John C. Wilson and H. M. Tennent, Ltd., is superlative. There are three lavish sets, painted and designed by Mr. Beaton in the period he loves so well; and he has been given a free and affluent hand with the costumes, which provide even the males with a certain lush elegance.

Mr. Lunt directed, and if he can't by now direct himself and his wife and people like Mr. Aherne and Miss Best in a Coward comedy he had better quit.

But he never will—we hope.